

JOHN GARDNER

he grew up in batavia, new york,
about thirty miles from rochester,
where i grew up.
he was just a few years older than i am.
i fled to california, where i've stayed.
he stayed east and wrote eight hundred page works
set in places i couldn't find a single thing
to comment on.
the internal revenue service,
which hates writers and teachers above all,
because we are apt not to balance
our fiscal check books,
only our immaterial ones,
bullied him to where he would have been
writing for them for the rest of his life.
my mother sent me all the clippings
from the rochester papers, knowing
i'm always fitting his novels into my classes
in contemporary fiction.
also he was an example
that sons need not leave home.

after his father had a stroke,
he commuted by motorcycle to his teaching job
at suny-binghamton. he tried to keep the farm
and he read to his father because his father
had once read to him.
he died on his motorcycle.
or maybe it was what freud called half-intentional
suicide, the death wish taking advantage of a lapse
in consciousness, like nathanael west's accident
in the rain in el centro.
or maybe there's a federal agency now
whose duty it is to kill off writers
as soon as it seems they might become
politically counter-productive.
my paranoia could allow for that:
maybe no american writer has died a natural death
since philip freneau froze to death
in a snowbank, most likely shitfaced.

john, we never met, not even through the mails,
so why was i so moved by your death?
probably it all goes back to
the genessee river valley, which i left
and you didn't. maybe i can best appreciate
against what odds your masterpieces
were made to weather that climate.

and although you wrote "on moral fiction"
and no one has accorded my writing

that particular adjective,
still, the week you died you were all set
to marry one of your former students.
so maybe we weren't all that unlike each other
after all.

QUO VADIS, M.F.A.?

do you remember how bartleby the scrivener
felt about his period of employment
in the dead letter office?

that's how i felt this spring
screening a hundred highly qualified applications
for a single one-year non-tenure-track lectureship
in creative writing.

WORKING GIRLS

to listen to the current propaganda
you'd think all women up to 1969
had been occupied entirely as housewives,
and yet it occurred to me the other day
that my mother and all my aunts
had been working women.

my mother was a teacher and very active
in professional organizations.
my aunt elizabeth was private nurse
to a rich lady.
lucy worked on a kodak assembly line
(as did jack).
pat was head of the stenographic pool
at stromberg-carlson.

terese was a saleslady at a detroit department store,
claire a clerk at the department of motor vehicles,
anna louise comptroller for an advertising firm.

when my grandfather, whom i never knew
(except to the extent i know myself),
moved his women to the city,
they went to work,
and they worked the rest of their lives.

elizabeth and lucy and pat and claire
did not marry.
my mother and terese and anna louise did